

I NEED A HERO
PART I: NAOMI'S PLIGHT

Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
Federal Way, WA
April 18, 2004

Where have all good men gone?

That's not a question – it's a quote. Can you say the next line of the song?

Where have all the good men gone
And where are all the gods?
Where's the street-wise Hercules
To fight the rising odds?

I need a hero
I'm holding out for a hero 'til the end of the night
He's gotta be strong
And he's gotta be fast
And he's gotta be fresh from the fight
I need a hero
I'm holding out for a hero 'til the morning light
He's gotta be sure
And it's gotta be soon
And he's gotta be larger than life.

We're beginning a new study this morning on the book of Ruth in the Old Testament. If you haven't discovered this short story before, you're going to love it. Ruth is practically a "they lived happily ever after" fairy tale. God plays the hero in the story when people desperately need him to. It reads like a breath of fresh air in the middle of stories of war and struggling and hardship. It's very different from the books around it too. You have all these stories that are national in scope, with big important characters doing larger than life things. In Ruth, you have a very personal story of an ordinary family in ordinary circumstances.

The story has four very distinct sections, almost like four acts in a play, and we'll look at one of them each week as we make our way through the book.

Ruth 1

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, 5 both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

6 When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. 7 With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

8 Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. 9 May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Then she kissed them and they wept aloud 10 and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

11 But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? 12 Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons— 13 would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has gone out against me!"

14 At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-by, but Ruth clung to her.

15 "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

16 But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." 18 When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

19 So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"

20 "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. 21 I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

22 So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

After I set up this story as such a happy one, you're probably wondering if I'm talking about the same one we just read! This chapter sets up the problem for us and doesn't sound all that promising. Naomi's saying "Where have all the good men gone? I need a hero!" You'll have to trust me when I say it ends up in a good spot.

The author sets the stage by telling us that this little story takes place in the days when the judges ruled. Those were hard days in Israel, roughly 3000 years before Christ. The country had no king at the time, and it was governed by a series of judges, some good and some not so good.

Have you ever dropped a coin in one of these spiral wishing wells? Each time the coin circles around it gets a little lower and a little lower until it finally drops through the bottom of the cone. If you read through the book of Judges, which records the history of this time period, you get the feeling that the country is spiraling down. Each cycle seems to take things a little lower and a little lower until the bottom finally drops out.

The book of Judges ends with this phrase:

Judges 21:25

In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.

It was like life in the old west – very volatile and unpredictable. And it is against this backdrop that we are introduced to a man named Elimelech and his wife Naomi. Names have great meaning in Hebrew, kind of like in Native American Culture – Running Bear, Dances With Wolves – saying someone's name is also making a statement.

Elimelech means "My God is King" and Naomi means "Pleasant." Every time Naomi said her husband's name she was declaring, "My God is King".

And as things started out, her life lived up to her name, Pleasant. If I'm Naomi, I'm feeling pretty good. I have my husband, My God is King, my two boys, and we're living together in Bethlehem, which means "House of Bread" since it is such a rich area for growing grain.

But something has happened. A famine has come to the land, and ironically now there's no food in the House of Bread. My God is still king though, so Elimelech and I decide to take our family to Moab. Not exactly what I had planned, but we'll come back soon.

Now ten years have passed. My God is King and I'm still serving him, but my boys have decided to marry foreign women. I'm not sure they'll stay true to the faith.

And now the unthinkable has happened. Elimelech has died, leaving me a widow in a foreign country. And to add to my pain, both my boys have died. They didn't even get to have any children.

So here I am stuck in this place with two widowed daughters in law. If my God is king, that means he's in control. And I'm finding it a little hard to take that he's aware of my situation and not helping me.

Can you feel the weight of Naomi's plight? It is really the plight shared by the whole human race. One of the biggest single challenges to faith is the whole concept of undeserved suffering. It challenges our whole concept of God, because we look at it and say, "If God is all powerful, why can't he change this? If God is all loving, why doesn't he change this?"

Those are impossible questions to answer entirely this side of heaven. What they do is force us to cling to a third truth about God. Not only is he all powerful and all loving, but he's also all knowing. He's ultimately the only one that can see the whole picture to know the why behind everything.

We can begin to share in that perspective somewhat with Naomi's story, because we can see how it turned out. We have the whole plot, and we can see that God did have a plan. And we learn some things about God along the way.

The first thing that I see is that **God survives questionable moves.**

The whole idea of Elimelech taking his family to Moab for relief from the famine, Elimelech's choice has a big question mark over it. The author doesn't make any judgment call, but it hardly seems right. For starters, Moab wasn't all that friendly with Israel. The people there worshipped other gods, and that had gotten Israel in trouble when they started intermarrying with them. People started abandoning their faith.

For another reason, moving to Moab showed a lack of faith in God's provision. Other people were staying and apparently survived just fine. Elimelech did what he thought would be best for his family, but once he got there, I'm sure there were days he doubted his decision.

The good news is that God was bigger than any mistaken reasoning Elimelech might have had. As we will see in a week or two, God was interested in Ruth and getting her back to Bethlehem. He was able to use Elimelech's choice to make his own will happen.

I find that incredibly freeing. In fact, that was a key lesson for me when Karin and I were first agonizing over whether or not to plant a church. I was so concerned about whether or not I was really following God's leading. We wrestled with the choice literally for years. What if we made a wrong decision? What if we were supposed to do something else? It became almost paralyzing.

But then I thought what IF it's the wrong decision? What will that matter? If I'm making the best choice I know how based on the information I have at the time, if I'm attempting to be faithful and obedient, but get something wrong along the way, will that tie God's hands? Absolutely not. He's so far beyond our control that he can work his will even when we botch things.

And we will botch things. Elimelech most likely did. We may take on a responsibility we shouldn't. We may buy the wrong house, pass up the right job, miss the opportunity of a lifetime or go for the glitter that wasn't really gold. It's bound to happen. But God survives our questionable moves. We don't have to live under a cloud of confusion, fearing that a wrong turn will ruin everything forever.

Proverbs 16:3-4

Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and your plans will succeed. The LORD works out everything for his own ends...

When Adam and Eve were in the garden, God said to them, "All this fruit is for you to eat, except that tree over there." If Eve wanted to make a salad for dinner, and she went to God and said, "Should I put in carrots or tomatoes?" God would have said, "Which do you want? You can choose. Just that one tree is off limits. All the other choices are wide open."

There's a freedom within God's plan for us that is often greater than we tend to think. God's will won't be ruined forever by our mistakes. Our choices will certainly bring consequences that may feel like they derail us forever. Praise God that he outlives consequences. He can bring us back from Moab.

It probably didn't feel that way for Naomi. She's really feeling rather bitter at this point. And you can't blame her. She is all alone in a foreign country, grieving over the loss of her entire family. A widow in those times had a tough go of it, especially when she didn't have any family around to support her. Plus, she now has two semi-dependent daughters-in-law who don't have any way of supporting themselves either.

It seems like a complete dead end. But the second thing we can see in this story is that **God turns dead-end streets into freeways.**

Naomi has decided to head back to Judah, but even that doesn't bring her much comfort. She tells people, "Don't call me Naomi, call me Mara, because God has made my life bitter."

Plus, Ruth is being stubborn. She won't listen to good sense. It's very draining. How will Naomi possibly be able to support two people. There's no real hope that Ruth will ever find another husband. And every day, Naomi will have to look her in the face and remember all their shared pain from Moab.

The prospect is depressing from a human perspective. But God sees it differently. From his view, Ruth is the key. Naomi fought so hard against Ruth going back with her, but in reality, Ruth was the one who would not only change Naomi's situation – she would alter the course of history for all of Israel, and even become part of the genealogy of Jesus. Where Naomi saw a dead end, God made a freeway.

Back in 1816, a man named David Jones felt like God was telling him to go to the island of Madagascar to tell people about Jesus. He took his wife and his baby. He was joined by another missionary family. Within three weeks of arriving there, all of them except David had died of disease, and he was so sick he had to leave the country to recuperate.

He returned to Madagascar anyway by himself, and kept trying to share the story of Jesus. It took 15 years before anyone there decided to accept what he was saying. The whole time, David was also working on translating the Bible into the language of Madagascar.

Just before he and some other missionaries were finished with their translation work, a new queen came into power who saw Christianity as a foreign threat. The missionaries managed to print out only 70 bibles before Christianity was outlawed and they were forced to leave the country.

At that point, fierce persecution broke out against the few Christians that were left behind in Madagascar. Bibles were burned, people were killed and churches were destroyed. David Jones came back to Madagascar to plead with the government to ease up on Christians. But he was unsuccessful. Nine of his converts were killed while he was there. He went back home and died less than a year later.

Pretty much a dead end. The man spent his whole life hitting his head against a brick wall. Everything he tried seemed to fail. But what he didn't know was this: After 20 years of persecution by that queen, the Bibles he had printed and the people he had helped become Christians had been so effective in spreading the news about Jesus that there were 7,000 Christians in Madagascar. God turned David Jones' dead end into a freeway.

God does some of his best work in impossible situations.

Romans 4:17

...the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

Sometimes, it seems God actually has to take us down that dead end before he can get us on the freeway. Sometimes he empties us out like Naomi, carving out a space to do something new and fill us back up.

And maybe that's where you feel he's got you this morning. You're waiting for the bulldozer to come and plow some ground so you can get moving again. And it feels like all the Sound Transit projects that stall out and take forever to actually happen. If that's

where you're at, I want to encourage you to just call out to God. I like what Brother Lawrence once said: "You need not cry very loud. He is nearer to us than we think."

Look at all the stories of people in the Bible who first experienced a time in the wilderness or a foreign land before God brought them into a place of abundance. My God is King and he loves to turn dead ends into freeways.

Not only that, the way he does it is unexpected. As it shows us here, **God paints big pictures with small brushes.**

Remember the show MacGyver, the former special forces agent who saved the world every week —just by using his brain? That guy could find himself in the most impossible situations. Just before the commercial, you'd never know how he could escape or solve the problem. But then he would find a paper clip and short circuit the nuclear missile, or a chocolate bar to stop the acid leak, and the next thing you knew, he had saved the day. And once again he proved that he was hands down the smartest man on TV, because he could use anything to get the job done.

It wasn't that the bobby pin or the piece of string he would use was all that special – what really mattered was the mind that could put it to a different use.

God works like MacGyver. He can use the small and insignificant things to get done what he wants to do. He doesn't need people with incredible talents or abilities – it's much more about the mind of a God who can look at us ordinary people and see incredible potential for so much more.

1 Corinthians 1:27-31

Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these "nobodies" to expose the hollow pretensions of the "somebodies"? That makes it quite clear that none of you can get by with blowing your own horn before God. Everything that we have — right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start — comes from God by way of Jesus Christ.

That's the pattern with God over and over in the Bible. He found the least likely people to do the most amazing things. God used Ruth – a foreign female, a highly unusual choice to change Israel's history. He used Ruth's little decision to return with Naomi to alter Naomi's life forever.

It's both humbling and encouraging at the same time. It's humbling because it proves that it isn't our own greatness that really counts in the long run. We cling to what makes us significant and different as individuals. We like to point out our own special abilities and where we excel. Yet those don't really matter to God. I once heard a quote that put some perspective on it. "God gave you your gifts. He's not impressed by them."

That's humbling. But it is also extremely encouraging to think that God might choose to use me to impact the lives of other people.

All of us, in spiritual terms, are living in Moab. We are sojourners who are far, far from our home in heaven, struggling to make our way until God says it's time to go home. That's why in 1 Peter, it says that we should live our lives as strangers here. He then says that in light of that fact, we should love one another deeply, from the heart.

We all need a Ruth to come along and help us make it. And we can all be a Ruth in the lives of people around us. Look at what she did: She made a total commitment to Naomi. She said, where you go, I'm going too. What you go through, I will put myself through. I will be there for you all the time. I'm ready to die for you. That sounds like loving deeply from the heart.

It sounds an awful lot like God himself, and what he did for us by becoming a human in Jesus. God the painter actually became a brush. Even today, he's saying to each of us, I am here for you. Whatever happens to you, I will be there. Wherever you are, nothing can separate you from my love.

That's the love he offers us, and the love he asks us to share with those around us. As long as we are here in Moab, we are called to be God's brushes – letting him work through us to change people's lives. My God is King, and he's painting a beautiful picture.

As you think about Naomi's story this week, ask yourself where you most relate to her.

First, am I afraid to make a move? Have I been looking at my choices and feeling the weight of my own decisions, to the point where I no longer am thinking that God is big enough to handle it if I make the wrong choice? My job is to prayerfully consider my options and do the best I can with what I know. God will take care of the rest to ensure that the final outcome is what he desires.

Second, do I need a bulldozer? Am I sitting at a dead end, waiting for God to turn it into a freeway? We throw it out there every week, but if you need to pray with someone after the service, grab one of us and let us take your need to God with you and ask him to clear a path for you.

And finally, who can I be a small brush for? Who is facing a difficult decision or a rough situation who needs somebody that will come along beside them and stick with them? Can I be a Ruth to someone's Naomi? Or, do I need someone to be that person for me?

You know, the passage we read ended this morning by saying Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem just as the barley harvest was beginning. We started out with a famine, and we end with a glimmer of hope. On the far side of struggle, there's the promise of something yet to come.

God survives our questionable moves. He turns dead end streets into freeways. And he paints his big picture with small brushes like you and me. That's the kind of God I want for my king. How about you?